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The Desire to Wipe the Slate Green, or Why the World Is in Need of a Hard Reset

Writing about nature does not come naturally. One is likely to find that nature, the biological starting point and the appropriation thereof, increasingly becomes the object of a burning political and ideological debate. As human beings, poised on the precipice between nature and culture, we ourselves are incapable of clearly determining just which way we are, but more importantly, which way we want to be. Even considering the history of the human species and its accumulated cultural legacy brings one no further than where they started, for it reveals a deeply troubled and ambivalent relation of the human and the natural. I use the term “natural,” in this biological context, with no subversive undertones in mind, to denote not only the environment as a tangible space in which to exist, but as an all-encompassing means of unifying all the dependencies between the species that constitute the correlated and intimately interlocked ecosystems.

Having applied this kind of logic and definition to the problem, one could end the paper right here. After all, a deliberate use of the adjective “all-encompassing” is a totalising device subsuming the human into the natural, therefore leaving no room for discussion. However, this superficially logical explanation of the issue contributes nothing to the understanding of the existing schism between nature and culture. I myself will not dare undertake this grand challenge, but instead would like to discuss the possible reasons for choosing one over the other by exploring the politics of purity present in the green discourse.

In *Physics and Philosophy*, German physicist Werner Heisenberg famously wrote that “we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.”¹

¹ Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy. The Revolution in Modern Science* (London: Unwin University Books, 1971 [1959]), p. 57.

In these words, Heisenberg has encapsulated what may now be perceived as the essential inability to accurately describe what nature truly is. Like Heisenberg's work, demonstrating the role of the observer influencing the outcome of the experiment, nature appears to be equally torn between what it essentially is and what people think it is or want it to be, which, unfortunately, colours our perception simply because we are unable to excise ourselves from nature completely, due to the fact that we can make no truly objective claims as per its status, owing to our being a part of the system we are trying to give an accurate description of.

The privileged status bestowed upon humanity, not infrequently through Holy Scriptures, outright gives us dominion over the mute nature and commands us to make the most of it, for the Earth is plentiful in pleasures, and serves as a garden of delight for the crowning achievement of Creation. Still, categorising such claims, as well as those who follow them, as "deluded" or "bigoted" without first considering their cultural relevance at the time of utterance is disingenuous at best; one has to account for the fact that such attitudes were being forged at a time when the array of scientific instrumentation and techniques was vastly less impressive than it is today. Nevertheless, the persisting resonance of these particular stances, despite numerous advances and paradigm shifts, really does seem to indicate that, indeed, old habits die hard.

Ecocritic Jonathan Bate argues that "[...] the land, the ocean, the polluted air, the endangered species – cannot speak for themselves," and as such, it has fallen to the ecocritic "to speak on behalf of the Other"²; it has fallen to the human to *narrate* the needs of the Other and its condition. Bate's claim begs the question of whether a change in stylistics is an attempt at a genuine redefinition of the relations of the human and the non-human, or whether all it amounts to is a PR publicity stunt. The change from monarch to spokesperson might, after all, appear to be but a symbolic one, with *homo sapiens* retaining their more accountable, yet still dominant position.

Those who are embracing their new role more enthusiastically claim that "[w]hat Alan Watts called 'the skin-encapsulated ego' [...] is being unhinged, peeled off. It is being replaced by wider constructs of identity and self-interest – by what you might call the ecological self [...] co-extensive with other beings and the life of our planet."³ On a similar note, poet Gary Snyder, quoting Zen Buddhist philosopher Dogen, proposes that "[t]o advance your own experience onto the world of phenomena is

² Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador/Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 72.

³ Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), p. 183.

delusion. When the world of phenomena comes forth and experiences itself, it is enlightenment.”⁴ Both of these examples openly recognise and acknowledge the importance of accepting the input of the natural world in order to complement the void one might experience as a result of the deficiency of the explicitly natural in their lives.

As the void, lacking the natural, attempts to remedy the existing deficiency, it also invites speculation on what nature might wish for us to learn from our interactions, attracting allegedly self-apparent truths and dogmas like a blank canvas attracts a paintbrush. In that space, there exists an overwhelming urge to celebrate the natural, shifting the focal point of the discourse by completely displacing the human element from the centre of our attention; a fragment philosophy, in which *the human* appears to be imposed upon. This reversal of values would wish us to accept that only the natural is the way to go. One can observe an interesting attachment to the notion of nature and the socio-political dimension that is opened by the mere mention of the word *natural*, with all of its connotations following: “[a]fter all, if the way you are living is ‘natural’, you can feel better about it. However difficult things may be in your life, you can explain it all away. ‘It’s natural. It can’t be helped’. But however comforting, these ideas obscure more than they explain.”⁵ This subversive line of argumentation explores the high possibility that what is considered natural is actually nothing more than a prescriptive approach, not aimed at presenting an internally equalised state of affairs, but rather favouring the already privileged positions, thus *making* them into a norm by the employment of green language and reference to the biological square one.⁶

Nevertheless, the flexibility with which the natural is presented as the desired state is staggering. On many levels, the all-encompassing quality of nature is duly reflected in the cultural mindscape of humanity, as both the creation myths and apocalypse scenarios might be thought of as employing natural imagery, be it Paradise, the garden of heavenly delights that begs to be regained, or the cataclysmic destruction brought upon by plagues, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and meteor showers. Still, I argue that between the two, the one more conducive to thinking in green terms is the heavenly scenario. This idyllic, carefree pastoral fantasy beckons to us, holding the promise of reunion just where it can be seen, yet tantalisingly beyond our grasp.

⁴ Gary Snyder, “Language Goes Two Ways,” in: *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds* (New York: Counterpoint, 1995), p. 179.

⁵ Rosalind Coward, “The Instinct,” in: *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 14.

⁶ Rosalind Coward, “The Instinct,” p. 14.

The establishment of the natural as the quintessential safe-space appears to endow it with the archetypal motherly attributes. However, every benevolent, caring and nurturing matriarch is also an eye-rolling, disapproving nanny, bound to give you a good hard spanking every time you break something, occasionally wishing you had moved out of the house already so she and your father could finally spend some quality time together. Conversely, could it be that the tendency to anthropomorphise certain phenomena is not a testament to the fondness that the human bestows upon their object of interest, but, perhaps, a hopeful plea, an address to the heavens? Slavoj Žižek argues that a position that is excessively difficult for us to accept is one of our essential impotence and passive observation.⁷ “There is,” he claims, “something deceptively reassuring in our readiness to assume full guilt and responsibility for the threats to our environment. We like to be guilty since if we are guilty then it all depends on us; we pull the strings, and so, in principle, we can also save ourselves by simply changing our lives.”⁸ As such, anthropomorphisation of the non-human and its subsequent infusing with agency may be viewed as but a device with which it is hoped that the inevitable can be staved off and, hopefully, kept at bay indefinitely.

The strong allure of the natural, due to its association with the Edenic and standing in direct opposition to the “contaminated” cultural, may be perceived as the purest. Concurrently, following the Edenic train of thought, the yearning for the lost connection may be equated with original sin and with its following imperative that commands to seek out the possibility of a reunion, stipulating that one shall know no spiritual rest due to their essential incompleteness. Luckily, the active engagement in the discourse of purity will purge one’s sins away, restore them to their purest form thus making one worthy of entering Paradise once again. On the surface, it is a benign celebration of Thoreauan simplicity and minimalism, yet Joel Garreau observes that “[h]istorically [...] voluntary simplicity has had at its most fervent adherents those who already have plenty.”⁹ It is noted that “we are afraid of and disgusted by the ‘impure’: those things which violate or transgress our fundamental cultural categorization.”¹⁰ Consequently, the zealous desire to purge

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “Catastrophic But Not Serious,” 00:29:19 – 00:29:42, accessed 13 April 2012, http://fora.tv/2011/04/04/Slavoj_Zizek_Catastrophic_But_Not_Serious.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “Catastrophic But Not Serious,” 00:29:19 – 00:29:42.

⁹ Joel Garreau, *Radical Evolution. The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies – and What It Means to Be Human* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), p. 176.

¹⁰ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 31–32. Quoted in Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity. The Virtual*

leapfrogs the nature/culture distinction, suffuses and attempts to apply its corrective influence even on entities not seeking absolution. This forceful transformation transpires on the example of nothing less than a quintessential product of culture: a laptop computer.¹¹

The ASUS Bamboo series of laptop computers is unmistakably an attempt at the merging of the positive traits associated with portable, relatively inexpensive technology, liberating the user by the promise of instant access to the realm of the digital that a personal computer represents, with that of the more nature-conscious and balanced as manifested by the bamboo. At first sight, it is a match made in Heaven, fusing together the best of both worlds, but underneath it proves to be an arranged marriage with only one goal in mind: to cleanse the product of the wasteful, polluting technology by applying but a veneer of eco-friendliness.

Despite the unmistakably singular status of the laptop computer as a man-made invention, the addition of an explicitly natural element, in this case a thin shaving of bamboo, perhaps not even replacing, but simply put on top of the synthetic lid, arguably complementing it, completes the exorcism, as if saying “there, there, it’s safe for you to use now. It won’t get any filth on you anymore,” adding “you will be redeemed, whether you want to or not” with a sinister grin. What is more, one of the official taglines under which the products have been advertised reads “Inspired by Nature, Designed for Style,”¹² apparently putting stylistic choice and fashion before a commitment to the environment via sustainability. Though commercially such marketing tactics may prove immensely successful given the current fixation of the first-world markets on the pure, they nevertheless fail in depicting the abovementioned product as something that it is not by attempting to redeem an entity that is perfectly content with being what it is, as it is not the product seeking atonement and absolution for its deeds, but their potential buyer, thus once again capitalising on the feeling of collective guilt.

Margaret Atwood’s 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*, in some respects, appears to indulge in this aspect of the politics of purity. On the surface, it is a science-fiction novel delineating yet another apocalypse supposedly caused by human scientific hubris. However, the novel reveals itself to be a speculative account of the extreme purists having their way, as

Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 266.

¹¹ ASUS Bamboo Series promotional materials, accessed 13 April 2013, http://event.asus.com/notebook/bamboo/usa/images/wp_1.jpg.

¹² Official ASUS Bamboo series tagline, accessed 13 April 2012, http://event.asus.com/notebook/bamboo/usa/index2_IIP.html.

it revolves around the aftermath of decisions of one brilliant geneticist who “remodels human nature according to ‘ecological’ criteria – an approach whose triumph the novel depicts as indistinguishable from catastrophe.”¹³

Bergthaller’s opinion verbalises precisely the same impression that has led to the somewhat facetious titling of this article. In this light, the author is far from defending multiple and various shortcomings of humankind, while still being aware of the enduring legacy of the species of *homo sapiens*. Contrary to some reactionary views striving for the return to a greener, simpler way of life, indubitably inspired by elements of the pristine imagery carefully calculated to achieve the right balance between guilt and an inflated sense of nostalgia, some decisions regarding our lives are either beyond our grasp, or have already been made on our behalf.

In the distant past the ancestral proto-hominid species arrived at the evolutionary fork in the road; clearly, be it by pure chance or nature’s intent, one path has been chosen for us, one which envisaged the use of external crutches to equalise and enhance the chances of survival against more specialised species; and it is the path of an accelerated, technological evolution. To denounce this part of the heritage of the humankind is, in effect to reject all the accomplishments of this otherwise rather successful species, for technology and calculated reasoning are not modern inventions, but part of what we are. Nevertheless, it is foolish to dismiss the perils of following the path of technology outright; after all, it is the path of an *accelerated* evolution, one which could lead to the species reaching an evolutionary dead-end in record time, but one that also offers the chance of transformation. In other words, the words of The Grateful Dead’s “The Wheel” – “you can’t go back and you can’t stand still / if the thunder don’t get you then the lightning will.”

Although Atwood’s novel follows a fairly unimaginative dystopian formula, in which the rich and entitled live their privileged lives in clean and sterile Compounds belonging to their respective biotechnological corporations, and the poor inhabit underdeveloped, dirty and infested areas, one of the underlying themes explores the notion of habitat and the species attached to it. When the disaster hits and the majority of humanity is wiped out, the civilised Compound territory can no longer support life, as it hardly maintains itself but rather relies on disseminated means of sustenance. It is stressed that in the event of a catastrophe, even the most sophisticated systems are bound to fail and succumb to decay

¹³ Hannes Bergthaller, “Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*,” *English Studies*, vol. 91, no. 7 (2010), p. 729.

as they are dependent both on other systems and the individuals who maintain them. This exercise lays bare the assumption of society being inherently cultural by presenting it for what it is due to the nature of its constituent elements: a co-dependent and fragile ecosystem.

The narrator/protagonist assumes the role of an outdoorsman, a hermit out-of-necessity. Left to fend for himself he builds himself a makeshift dwelling in the traditional spirit of an outdoor adventure. However, his trip is a permanent one; there is no turning back, for there is nothing to turn back to. Instead of a blissful respite, the act of an uplifting communion with nature takes on the character of the struggle of an individual intruding on an environment that actively seeks to oust his presence and one in which *he* is the element upsetting the equilibrium. Despite the now-intimate connection with nature the protagonist remains wired to procuring nutrition in the only way he knows is possible: returning to his original habitat. He periodically returns, scrounging for resources; yet unfortunately, this is not to last.

The well-oiled machine of civilisation is well-oiled no more; it grindingly comes to a standstill, as it was, “a sort of monster, its main by-products being corpses and rubble. It never learned, it made the same mistakes over and over, trading short-term gains for long-term pain. It was like a giant slug, eating its way relentlessly through all the other bioforms on the planet, grinding up life on earth and shitting it out the backside in the form of pieces of manufactured and soon-to-be-obsolete plastic junk.”¹⁴ Yet as gruesome and harrowing as this portrayal is, it is useful to remember that *this* was the default *ecos* of the protagonist, and as the rules of evolution ring true across every species, including humans, a given species adapts to life in its particular environment, no matter how inhospitable.

Seeing as this kind of reliance on the immediate *ecos* might be viewed as a dependency, an addiction even, the only option is to remove the human species from the chain of interspecies relations. The aforementioned geneticist alters the human condition by bringing it closer to nature through deviously unnatural means. He splices foreign genes into human DNA, which results in an unprecedented degree of self-reliance in the new species, whose impact on their habitat is minuscule. In doing so, he effectively removes the source of yearning and inadequacy that characterise the human being and shape their culture into one that is compensating for said flaws.

Still, does that not incapacitate the species in their allegiance both to nature and culture?

¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), p. 243.

The reliance on culture is eradicated so as to prevent the species from spiraling out of control, devouring the remainder of creation; yet the species is equally removed from the continuity of nature, prevented from taking part in the dendritic trickling of energy from the stars and throughout all living organisms.

Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto* outlines the philosophy for the quintessentially hybridical nature/culture entity, the cyborg, yet the rules may be applied equally as well to humans, as we happen to fit the description. Such an impure entity “was not born in a Garden; it does not seek unitary identity [...]; it takes irony for granted.”¹⁵ Such a fragmentation and a denial of the reunion with the pure, though admittedly tentative in tone, neither celebrating, nor lamenting our separateness from what is deemed natural, unequivocally communicate one message: we are not privy to the inner sanctum of the Garden anymore, and there is no way back. What is more, in the words of Kurt Vonnegut, “[e]verything is going to become imaginably worse, and never get better again.”¹⁶ We might just as well make our peace with it. It may appear as if it were the End of the World as we know it, but both we and our habitat have endured far worse.

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in: *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 83.

¹⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, “Address to Graduating Class at Bennington College,” accessed 13 April 2012, <http://jsomers.net/vonnegut-1970-commencement.html>.

Tomasz Porwit

Pragnienie nowego początku albo: Dlaczego światu przyda się radykalny reset

Streszczenie

Esej jest próbą analizy niektórych popularniejszych trendów ideologicznych „zielonego” dyskursu, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zagadnień czystości oraz powrotu świata do wyidealizowanego stanu z czasów przedindustrialnych, niedotkniętego problemami współczesnej egzystencji. Omawia on dążenie do czystości pod kątem ekopolityki oraz ekopoetyki, jednocześnie sprzeciwiając się stanowi czystości, samemu noszącemu znamiona kulturowej manipulacji, jako pożądanemu. Po krytycznym odczytaniu fragmentów *Oryksa i Derkacza* Margaret Atwood, wysunięta zostaje teza, że uporczywe faworyzowanie wyższości Natury nie różni się w skutkach od innych apokaliptycznych scenariuszy, w których ludzkość przymusowo powraca do czasów przedtechnologicznych, tym samym podkreślając wagę kontekstu ludzkiej kondycji, która czerpie garściami ze swojego podwójnego, kulturowo-naturalnego rodowodu.

Tomasz Porwit

Der Wunsch nach einem neuen Anfang oder warum die Welt einen Kaltstart braucht

Zusammenfassung

In dem Essay wird es versucht, einige populäre ideologische Trends in dem „grünen“ Diskurs zu analysieren und besonders solche Themen, wie: die Reinheit und das Wiedererlangen von der Welt des idealisierten Zustandes aus der vorindustriellen Zeit, der durch Probleme der gegenwärtigen Existenz nicht belastet war, anzusprechen. Der Verfasser bespricht das Streben nach der Reinheit vom Standpunkt der Ökopolitik und Ökopoetik aus und erhebt gleichzeitig den Widerspruch gegen den erwünschten Reinheitszustand, der selbst die Merkmale von einer kulturellen Manipulation trägt. Nach der kritischen Analyse des Romans *Oryx und Crake* von Margaret Atwood stellt er die These auf, dass hartnäckige Begünstigung der Überlegenheit der Natur sich in ihren Folgen nicht von anderen apokalyptischen Prognosen unterscheidet, in denen die Menschheit zwangsweise zu vortechnologischer Zeit zurückkehrt und dadurch die Rolle der menschlichen Kondition hervorhebt, die aus ihrer doppelten kulturnatürlichen Abstammung aus dem Vollen schöpft.